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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHIANG MAI 000010

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STATE PASS HFAC (YEO, RICHARDSON)
STATE FOR EAP/MLS, IO, DRL AND H
GENEVA FOR RMA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 1/10/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [TH](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: STAFFDEL YEO FOCUSES ON REFUGEES, IDPS AND BURMESE POLITICAL GROUPS

REF: 07 CHIANG MAI 179 (REFUGEES BEMOAN BURMESE EXILES); 07 CHIANG MAI 160 (BURMA BORDER CROSSING QUIET)

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CLASSIFIED BY: alex barrasso, Chief, pol/econ, chiang mai.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

1. (C) In meetings with Staffdel Yeo, some politically active Burmese exile groups requested stronger U.S. sanctions against Burma, claimed to play a significant role in organizing recent protests inside Burma, and asked for U.S. support for a constitution they drafted as an alternative to the Burmese regime's National Convention. Humanitarian assistance groups highlighted an ever-increasing workload. The Staffdel - during a three-day trip to the Thai-Burma border in early January - conveyed strong Congressional support for change in Burma, described Congressional efforts to enhance sanctions, and praised the efforts of groups on the border. End Summary.

2. (SBU) The six-member delegation from the House Foreign Affairs Committee was led by Deputy Staff Director Peter Yeo, and included professional staff members Eric Richardson, Douglas Anderson, Dennis Halpin, Manpreet Anand, and Cobb Mixter. They traveled to Mae Sot, Tak Province from January 4-6 for meetings with UNHCR, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, the Mae Tao Clinic, Political Defiance Committee, National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB - an umbrella organization of Burmese exile groups), the Palaung Women's Organization, National League for Democracy Liberated Areas, and Human Rights Watch. They also visited Mae La Refugee Camp and met with politically-active Burmese who recently migrated to Thailand. Initially, Thai security officials intrusively photographed the delegation during meetings, but the unwelcome attention stopped after discussions with the Foreign Ministry and local authorities.

Refugees - Still Only a Trickle

3. (C) About 200 Burmese have crossed the border into Thailand and approached UNHCR seeking protection due to their participation in the protests last August and September, according to Mae Sot UNHCR delegation head Yoshimi Saita, who briefed the Staffdel over lunch on January 4. Saita said that initially, UNHCR issued Provincial Admission Board (PAB) slips to all Burmese claiming to have participated in the demonstrations, but stopped issuing these slips at the end of November when the credibility of the applicants became

increasingly suspect. Saita noted, however, that UNHCR intended to resume processing this caseload the week of January 7. He stressed that UNHCR could not make final status determinations in these cases due to the lack of an agreement between it and Thailand, and that this responsibility would fall to the PABs, which he said should begin operating again in the near future.

14. (C) In response to a question from the Staffdel, Saita speculated that the population of the nine camps in Thailand housing Burmese refugees could be halved to approximately 70,000 within three years. He also stated that approximately half of all Burmese refugees in the camps were interested in resettlement to a third country. He said that number would probably be higher were it not for provisions in U.S. law preventing combatants from the Karen National Liberation Army (the military wing of the Karen National Union - KNU) and other armed groups from resettling that had scared some away. Yeo pointed out that legislation recently signed into law had changed these provisions, extending the option of resettlement to former combatants who were previously ineligible.

15. (C) After lunch with Saita, the group visited Mae La refugee camp, which is home to approximately 41,100 refugees from Burma, most of whom have lived there since 1995. According to Camp

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Commander Akkarapan, the camp was established to consolidate refugees into one secure area and prevent Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA - a pro-regime KNU splinter group) troops from crossing the border and kidnapping refugees, as happened repeatedly when the refugees were more spread out. He said the camp's population is approximately 50 percent Christian, 35 percent Buddhist, and 15 percent Muslim. The biggest challenges he faces include crime resulting from drug and alcohol use, sanitation, the presence of unauthorized family members on camp grounds, domestic violence, and a lack of family planning, he asserted. Additionally, Akkarapan noted that Thai residents in surrounding villages are resentful of the fact that Burmese refugees in the camp receive international aid while they receive absolutely none. Camp committee members told the delegation that when the U.S. resettlement program was first announced, 20,000 residents of Mae La Camp applied, of which approximately 9,000 have since been resettled. Since then, they said, some have withdrawn their applications, and others whose applications are pending have yet to receive a response. Some families that have resettled tell them they are happy, committee members said, while others speak of difficulties assimilating, particularly linguistically.

IDPS and Migrants: Humanitarian Needs Growing

16. (C) In separate meetings at the Mae Tao Clinic and Palaung Women's Organization (PWO), interlocutors spoke openly about a number of problems they face, including high rates of HIV infection, malaria, TB, an increasing number of school-aged children crossing from Burma into Thailand, and trafficking in persons. Dr. Cynthia Maung, Director and Founder of the Mae Tao Clinic, told the group that last year, approximately 1,500 people voluntarily underwent HIV testing, with nearly 30 percent testing positive. Malaria and TB remain significant problems, she noted, comprising a substantial portion of the Clinic's case load. (Note: According to Ref A, the Clinic treats approximately 8,000 cases of TB and 300 of malaria each year. End Note.) Of the estimated 150,000 Burmese residing in Mae Sot, Dr. Cynthia speculated that as many as 30,000 were of school age. Right now, the number served by Burmese-language schools in the community is only 8,000, meaning that only roughly one fourth of Burmese school-aged children living in the Mae Sot area actually attend classes.

17. (C) Though Mae La Camp Committee members told the delegation that trafficking in persons was not a problem inside the camp, they noted that Burmese outside the camp were indeed at risk. The Palaung Women's Organization discussed its efforts to combat the problem, highlighting its programs to educate women about their rights and family planning. The PWO provides training on gender-based violence, including rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, trafficking in persons, and capacity-building training on democracy and political awareness. It also provides adolescent and reproductive health training to Palaung women in Burma, including through a mobile health clinic, and in China in areas such as human trafficking and women's rights.

18. (C) The organization conducts an internship and capacity-building program for young Palaung to gain skills in

computer literacy, English language, office management, and income generation. In a separate meeting with these women on January 7, they told Pol/Econ Chief and visiting Rangoon PolOff that after this training, women understood it was not right for their husbands or brothers to beat them and were able to advocate for their rights. They related one incident in which a Palaung woman's brothers beat her regularly if they did not like the food she cooked for them, intimating that this was not uncommon. In another case, they told us that a former Palaung State Liberation Army soldier realized that he beat his wife daily simply because that is what his father did, but that after women in his village went to the training, he realized it was

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wrong and stopped.

Political Groups Embellish Their Role in Protests

9. (C) In separate meetings with NCUB Secretary General Maung Maung and NCUB member groups such as the Political Defiance Committee and National League for Democracy Liberated Areas, exiles spoke of a significant role for their groups in the August-September protests, though they were unable to specify exactly what activities they had undertaken. They spoke in general terms about assisting activists inside the country to communicate with each other, but did not elaborate on their networks. Maung Maung told the group that the Burmese regime is "in chaos," and strongly urged the delegation to strengthen U.S. sanctions. Particularly, he opined that legislation forcing Chevron to divest from its projects in Burma was key, asserting that oil and gas revenues had allowed the regime to consolidate power in 1988.

10. (C) Yeo noted that this provision might not be included in the final version of the Jade Act. He expressed much greater optimism about passage of provisions restricting the import of gems and teak, stating that he hoped they would be enacted into law early this year. Maung Maung also requested USG support for a constitution drafted by NCUB groups that he viewed as an alternative to the regime's National Convention. Though Yeo demurred on that point, he made sure to emphasize strong Congressional support for sanctions against Burma in general and for change in Burma. He emphasized that both the President and First Lady were engaged, and that support from Congress was bipartisan.

Comment

11. (C) Exile groups' claims to have played a significant role in the August-September protests directly contradict what participants now residing in Thailand have told us. Septel will report on meetings the Staffdel held with three monks and several other politically-active Burmese now in Thailand, all of whom told us the demonstrations were organized from the inside, with exile groups playing a minor supporting role. Additionally, the exile groups' inability to specify exactly how they supported the demonstrations further detracts from their claims.

12. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Rangoon and Bangkok.

13. (U) The Staffdel did not have an opportunity to clear this message.
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